

## NEW PUBLICATIONS.

## IRISH HISTORY.

**HISTORY OF THE IRISH PEOPLE.** By W. A. O'CONOR. In two volumes, pp. 251, 316. Manufacturer: Abel Heywood & Son, London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co.

The title of this work is misleading. It is not what it purports to be, namely, a history of the Irish people, even from the standpoint of the author. For he says almost at the opening of his narrative: "When we speak of the Irish people, distinguishing them from the Saxon or Norman chiefs, we really refer to that portion of the inhabitants of our island who are sprung in part lineally, but altogether politically and morally, from the earliest settlers." These earliest settlers were the Fomorians and the Partholonians, and there is no authentic or satisfactory account of either of those peoples extant. They are alleged to have been respectively Iberian and Aryan, and while the former appear to have been little if at all removed from savagery, the latter seem to have brought with them a certain amount of civilization. But the result of postulating an "Irish People" is altogether distinct from the inhabitants of Ireland who have made its history since the first invasion of foreign conquerors, is to produce so confused and fallacious a view of events that it is impossible to follow them to any useful purpose. Yet Mr. O'Connor, while professing to write a history of the Irish people, meaning as he says, a history of the aboriginal Irish, has really contrived almost to omit them altogether, or has employed them somewhat after the fashion of a Greek chorus. It is clear that after a certain time all the various races which in turn overran Ireland, became merged in its general population. This is what occurred in England, and the best proof of such absorption may be found at the present day in the general diffusion of certain national characteristics among by far the greater part of the Irish people. But Mr. O'Connor has undertaken to create an impossible and mythical Irish people who were always the victims and never the aggressors; who maintained a mysterious passion for liberty which they were never able to embody in action; who are wholly irresponsible for any of the troubles of the country; who are represented at one and the same time as being passive as sheep, yet upon whom unconquerable yearning for independence the destiny of their country depends. Other Irish historians have lamented the fatal lack of unity which they declare has repeatedly prevented Irish emancipation, but Mr. O'Connor explains every failure to act in conspiracy as being due to race animosities or to the pernicious influence of Milesians or Scots or Normans or Franks, or Anglo-Normans.

A real history of the Irish people would undoubtedly be a very interesting work, but it is questionable whether such a history will ever be written either by an Irishman or an Englishman. For the people of both countries appear to have got into a perfectly hopeless way of regarding one another. The Irishman looks upon England as the embodiment of tyranny, cruelty, oppression and rapacity. The Englishman looks upon Ireland as the embodiment of impracticality, turbulence, treachery and rhodomantle. Neither of these views is compatible with the historical spirit, and, therefore, it is not remarkable that no satisfactory history of the Irish people has hitherto been written. Mr. O'Connor's ideas of history, indeed, are specially vague and eccentric. Throughout these volumes he does not cite a single authority. He appears to consider it quite unnecessary to do more than make assertions. When he affirms in the most positive way that there was absolutely no foundation in fact for the alleged massacre of 1680, it does not occur to him that such a position requires extraordinary support. So when he gives Mr. Froude the lie, as several times does, he is content with simple contradiction, and though he is frequently advancing entirely novel views and theories of historical events, in no single instance has he taken the pains to fortify his statements by demonstration. It follows that as a history his book is without much value. In fact it has the capital fault of being written too exclusively from one side of the question. Yet even so partial and loose a writer cannot avoid making the fact clear that Ireland has suffered more from the chronic discord of her own people than from any other cause. In the earlier history of the island there is only a monotonous succession of quarrels and treasons among the native rulers. Petty king after petty king aspires to dominion, and is briefly overthrown. It is a scene in which every man seems to be fighting for his own hand, and neither the fear of foreign subjugation nor the hope of domestic prosperity has ever been powerful enough to put a stop to these intestine convulsions.

Yet no history of Ireland, however partial and defective, can fail to bring into strong relief the crimes of England against that most unhappy country. England herself suffered all the pangs of conquest. Her aboriginal people were hunted like game through her forests and moors. They also were dispossessed of their land and forced to accept the rule of the brutal, insolent and grasping Normans. But they learned to assimilate themselves to the new conditions, and in the end they absorbed the invaders. In Ireland, on the other hand, the people were trampled in turn by all the foreign immigrants, and the latter, in order to possess themselves of the land, and to keep down insurrection, subjected their victims to a process of torture which extended over centuries. It is quite impossible to palliate the severity of the measures at different times resorted to for the purpose of crushing out resistance to opulence. Nor is it possible for any dispassionate student of history to find fault with the Irish for their efforts to take advantage of England's distress and danger. There certainly could not be obligation resting on a people who had been systematically sacrificed and abused, and nothing can be much more irrationally than much of the English complaint of Irish turbulence and treachery. The plain truth is that the Irish people were first plundered and then enslaved, and that the English have no more right to complain of the inevitable consequences of their degradation than the Southern slave-holders had to try to make capital of the negro's ignorance and inferiority. But while recognizing the intolerable wrongs inflicted upon Ireland, the dispassionate historian must point with a clear emphasis to the consideration that a people whose individual bravery is proverbial, who have attested their intellectual force so often, who have given so many world-known names to art, and science, and literature, and arms, must long ago have succeeded in conquering their independence had their efforts not been eternally frustrated by their fatal inability to act in harmony. And while the suffering of the Irish people for centuries is taken full account of, it must also be realized that one of the effects of that suffering (perhaps) has been to encourage in the lower classes a tendency to grind the faces of their fellows whenever they have the opportunity. Thus it has been made evident that while the tenant-farmers may have been oppressed by the landlords, the peasantry, or agricultural-laborer class, has been very much more cruelly used by the tenant-farmers. The latter have far exceeded the landlords in rack-renting, and general extortion, and it has for some time been clear that when the controversy between the tenants and landlords has been settled it will be necessary to redress the relations between the former and the peasantry. We have intimated that some of these evil tendencies may be the results of former degradation, but even if that be the case the fact of their existence is none the less harmful.

Mr. O'Connor, like most Irish writers, thinks that repeal of the Union is the panacea for Irish trouble. We are unable to see the force of this position. The causes which have always operated to prevent the Irish from succeeding in their attempts to free themselves are evidently in full force still. There is no more ground for hope of a united Ireland than there was in 1782; or for that matter, at any period within the past thousand years. The political leaders who have come to the front latterly are not of a kind to warrant much expectation of renewed patriotism. As to what Mr. O'Connor thinks of the prospect, it is by no means easy to understand. His style is peculiar, like his methods. At intervals he appears to struggle quite hard to be impartial, and under the influence of these occasional accusations of his moral conscience he sometimes contradicts his more rhetorical and imaginative periods. But

he is too much given to what would be called here "making the eagle scream," while in what he probably intends as his most impassioned flights he is apt to fall into bathos. Nor is it at all conducive to a clear understanding of events that Mr. O'Connor so obstinately refuses to portions of the population of Ireland the title of "the Irish people." In the rebellion of 1793 it is, for instance, notorious that the chief atrocities perpetrated against the "subjects" were perpetrated by the Irish yeomanry. But the fact that this yeomanry was composed of Orange Protestants cannot alter the equally painful fact that it was composed of men who were in all respects as much Irishmen as the Catholics they hunted and maimed. And the concealment or evasion of this truth vitiates the conclusions of the historian. Though he is endeavoring to show why it was that the Irish always failed in their efforts at emancipation, yet he puts out of sight a principal explanation of their failure. Had true patriotism been the national inheritance, no difference of religion, and certainly no incitements of personal greed, could have divided the nation into warring factions, nor would they have so often sacrificed common interests to the contemptible and petty gratification derived from indulgences in those ignoble emities. We are unable to gather from his language whether Mr. O'Connor wholly condemns the Phoenix Park murders, with a brief reference to which his second volume closes. Judging from some expressions in other parts of his work, he may consider assassination vented under certain conditions, though we are reluctant to conclude that this is his sober belief. It is curious that he appears to have no views of his own upon the land question, and he apparently declines to venture an opinion as to the future of his country. We cannot say that he has written a work which will be a necessity to the student of history, or that he has imparted any new elements of cool judgment into a discussion already superheated. The history of the Irish people has yet to be written by a hand not only sympathetic but impartial, and perhaps this task will, after all, have to be undertaken by a foreigner, whose removal from the scene may give him the inestimable advantage of an unprejudiced view.

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